FOUR CHAPTERS

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Much of the controversy over my *Four Chapters* falls outside the province of literary criticism. This is only natural, for the background to the story is vividly coloured by the passions aroused by the political struggle and turmoil in modern Bengal. Not only are we too close to that scene ; there is, still, a constant radiation of its heat through our minds. It is for this reason that to many readers the setting of the story appears more important than the story itself. I can only hope that when the present agitation of spirit recedes into the distant past and becomes merely the subject of dispassionate historical research, the imagination of the reader will be free to accept the story in a spirit of detachment. In other words, it will be possible, then, to look at it solely as literature.

I should like to set down what, as its author, I have to say about the story. I know what was in my mind when I sat down to write it and I can, therefore, supply that particular bit of personal information ; what it has turned out to be, it is for the reader and the critic to judge in the light of their own taste and ability. It is natural for

taste and ability to vary with individuals ; so that their criticisms are also likely to be various in kind and quality. The writer should be indifferent to them, depending on time alone for the correct assessment.

What might be called the only theme of the book is the love of Ela and Atindra. The nature and course of the love between man and woman is determined not only by the individual characters of the lovers ; it is influenced also by the impact of their circumstances on them. The river brings down its gushing nature from the mountain-top that gives it birth, but it acquires its distinctiveness from the contour of the land through which it flows. The same is the case with love. On the one hand, there is the inner feeling, on the other, the conflict with outward circumstances. It is the combination of these two factors that gives the complete picture its individuality. I have tried in this story to body forth that individuality in the love of Ela and Atindra. I have had to show the capital asset of their natures, as well as to render an account of their transactions with the outside world with which they had to deal to the last.

Much of this world produced by the play of events in our political struggle, I have naturally seen according to my own lights, though fringes of it have actually touched my experience. Its

appeal is likely to be different to different persons, just as direct experience of it must necessarily be of many kinds. But if the story is to be regarded as a piece of literature, controversy over its political context is uncalled-for, for my picture of that context must be accepted as authentic. If even a Christian were to read *Kumarasambhavam*, he must be prepared to accept without question Kalidasa's account of the Hara-Parvati story, and not bring in theological discussions about its validity. Whether this Puranic story is in strict accordance with the tenets of the Sankhya philosophy or not is a question that does not even merit a reply ; for in Kalidasa's treatment of his theme the main emphasis is on the love and union of Hara and Parvati. So much so, that Kalidasa seems to treat with indifference even the story of Kumara's birth.

If a reader should remark that the background to my story is mainly or partly a figment of my imagination, as a story-teller there would be no harm in my pleading guilty to the charge. Nowhere in the book is there any indication of the final outcome of the movement directed by Indranath or of what happened to Batu or Kanai. The end of the story is solely concerned with the love of Atindra and Ela, and this conclusion gives a completeness to the picture of that love.

There is another bone of contention. In the

course of the story the different characters have voiced their views about the revolutionary movement. If these comments on the movement had been entirely absent, the context would have lost all meaning. It must be assumed that the opinions expressed serve only to support and confirm the characterization of the speakers. Should anyone suspect that some of these opinions tally with my own, then I would submit that such speculation is irrelevant and extraneous to the matter in hand and, so far as the story is concerned, equally valueless whether valid or otherwise. If the views expressed by a speaker were to be found inconsistent with his character, then only could the author be charged with a serious defect in his writing.

If any learned professor should succeed some day in proving beyond the shadow of a doubt, that in the words he speaks, as well as in his attitude and behaviour, Hamlet is Shakespeare himself—true or not, this would neither enhance nor lower the value of *Hamlet* as a piece of dramatic art. Similarly, it would be saying nothing about the quality of the play if one were to make the incredible statement that nowhere in it does Shakespeare reveal himself.

To sum up:

It is unnecessary in any literary appraisal of *Four Chapters* to discuss whether it propagates a

particular creed or moral. It is obvious that its main interest centres round the story of two modern Bengali lovers. The revolutionary movement in Bengal has provided their love with its special dramatic setting. Descriptions of the movement are of secondary importance: what matters as literature is the portrayal of the poignance and pain of their love against the stormy background of the revolution. Controversy and moral preaching are fit material for articles in periodicals, not for literature.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SCENE is a Calcutta tea-shop. On one side is a little room in which a few school and college text-books, mostly second-hand, are displayed for sale. Among them are some English translations of modern Continental stories and plays. These the students read, so far as they may, as they turn over the pages. To this no objection is offered by the owner of the shop, Kanai Gupta, a retired sub-inspector of police.

For those who want to have their tea in comparative privacy, a portion of the front room is partitioned off by a screen of tattered sacking. This part of the shop shows to-day signs of special preparation. The inadequacy of chairs and stools has been made good by sundry packing cases marked 'Darjeeling Tea'. The tea-service also lacks uniformity, of course; blue enamel cups and saucers supplement white porcelain. In a broken-handled milk-jug on the table is a bunch of flowers.

It is nearly three in the afternoon. The boys, when they had invited Ela, had set two-thirty as the exact time, and had specially requested her not to be a minute late. The reason for

fixing this untimely hour was that only then would the shop be empty. Ela had come exactly on time, but not one of the boys was to be seen anywhere. As she sat alone, wondering whether she had mistaken the date, she was startled to see Indranath coming into the room—surely the last place where he could have been expected to appear.

Indranath had spent many years in Europe, and had made a name for himself in scientific circles. He was qualified to hold the highest positions. But, while in Europe, he had happened on a few rare occasions to meet an Indian political suspect, on which ground he found, when he came back home, that every door to advancement was closed against him. At last, through the special recommendation of a distinguished English scientist, he secured the post of a teacher, but under a far less competent superior. Incompetency and intense envy go hand in hand, so that all kinds of obstacles were placed in the way of his attempts to continue his scientific researches, until, finally, he was transferred to a college in which there was no laboratory.

The bitter realization at length dawned on Indranath that in his own country it was hope-

less for him to dream of rising to the height of his powers, although he felt sure that elsewhere he could have won recognition and honour. Here he stood condemned to turn the mill of routine teaching to the end of his working days, after which a meagre pension would carry him on somehow to the end of life itself. To such prostitution of his talents he was utterly unprepared to submit. Eventually he started a small class for teaching French and German, and also helped science students with their botany and geology. In some fissure in the depths of this little institution of his, there lodged a seed of secret purpose, which spread its underground ramifications, across prison yards, far and wide through the country.

'You here, Ela?' remarked Indranath.

'You forbade the boys to come to my house,' replied Ela, 'so they asked me to tea here.'

'That I know already. So I found urgent work for them elsewhere. I have now come to apologize to you on their behalf, and to settle their bill.'

'Why was it so necessary to break up our party?'

'To suppress the fact that your relations with the boys are cordial. You'll see in the newspapers

to-morrow that I've also sent in an article over your signature.'

'If it has been written by you, no one will believe my signature to be genuine. Your style can't so easily be palmed off on another.'

'I've not only disguised my handwriting but seen to it that the article shows little of intelligence and much of moral sentiment.'

'In what way?'

'Well, you have written that our boys are going to ruin the country by their untimely attempts to rouse it. You have piteously appealed to the women of Bengal to do their best to cool the overheated heads of these impossible jackanapes. But, you have pointed out, that can't be done by good counsel offered from afar. The women must go amongst them, must go into their very dens of intoxication, even at the risk of being themselves laid open to the fate of political suspects. You women are of the mother sex, you have said, and if you can save these hapless misguided boys by taking their punishment on yourselves, such sacrifice, even unto death, would be worth while. You know, Ela, how often you put forward your claim to belong to the mother sex. I've only soaked those words in salt tears and put them into the writing; when

the mother-loving reader reads them his eyes will brim over. After this, if, you were a man, it wouldn't have been impossible for you to get the title of Rai Bahadur.'

'I'll not deny,' said Ela, after a pause, 'that what you've made me say could have been my real sentiments. I do so love these horrid boys —where can you find their equals? I've been with them since we were in college together and I lost my parents. At first, I must confess, they used to write all kinds of things about the girl students on the blackboard. Their pranks made some of the girls angry, but I always sided with the boys. I knew it was because they were unused to meet our sex in these surroundings that they couldn't behave properly. When they got used to us their whole tone softened down to naturalness—occasionally perhaps, to an even softer note. But what of that? I know from my own experience how easy it is to get on with the boys, if only the girl doesn't turn huntress, consciously or unconsciously. Then I saw them rushing off, one by one, the best of them, who had no touch of vulgarity in them, whose true manhood knew how to respect women—'

'You mean,' interjected Indranath with a

which the rumblings could not be heard, but only the cruel flashes sometimes seen. In his looks there was a polished urbanity like a sharpened knife. Harsh words were not difficult for him to speak, but he spoke them with a smile. Anger never raised his voice, but only changed the quality of his laugh. He took just so much care of his appearance as was necessary for his dignity, and no more. His short-clipped hair needed no special attention to be kept in place. His complexion was almond, with just a touch of colour in his face. In his glance was the glint of keen insight, in his compressed lips unyielding resolve. He could make the most impossible claims without a qualm, secure in the conviction that they could not be lightly disregarded. Some believed that his intelligence was unusual, others that his power was supernatural; so that some had limitless veneration for him, others an unaccountable dread. Students all over the country looked on him as an uncrowned king.

'What is the wrong I have done?' asked Indranath, smiling.

'You have laid on Uma the command to get married when she doesn't at all want to.'

'Who says she doesn't?'

'She says so herself.'

'It's possible she doesn't know her own mind, or won't speak it.'

'Didn't she swear to you that she would never marry?'

'The promise was truly meant then, but it is no longer true now. Truth cannot be created by word of mouth. She herself would have broken her pledge. I am saving her from that disgrace by letting it be done under compulsion.'

'The responsibility for keeping or not keeping her word was hers alone—what if she decided to break it and accept the consequences?'

'Once breaking is started, one never knows how far it will spread, and the losses would fall on all of us.'

'The poor girl is weeping her heart out.'

'In that case I'll shorten the period of her tribulation till the day after to-morrow.'

'What of the rest of her life that will be left over after the day after to-morrow?'

'The tears shed by girls before marriage are like the proverbial morning clouds that disperse on the rising of the sun.'

'Oh, you are cruel!'

'That's because God, who loves man, is Him-

self cruel. His indulgence is for the lower animals.'

'Surely you know that Sukumar is the one whom Uma loves?'

'That's just why I am separating them.'

'As a punishment for their love?'

'Punishment for love is nonsense. You might as well talk of punishing a person for getting smallpox. All the same, it's better to send the sufferer out of the house to the hospital.'

'Why not let Uma marry Sukumar, then?'

'What crime has poor Sukumar committed—one of the best of our boys?'

'Suppose he himself wants to marry Uma—'

'Not at all unlikely. That's why I am in such a hurry. It's so easy for a girl to turn the head of a gallant fellow like Sukumar. A few teardrops, duly shed, would be enough to convince him that his civility was tantamount to encouragement. Are you vexed at my bluntness?'

'Why should I be vexed? Do I not know from experience with what silent skill women have often continued to bring about this encouragement, and how the men have had to bear the brunt of it afterwards! The time has come for dealing equal justice to the sexes; and the girls

cannot bear me because I try to do that. Anyhow, what has the victim, to whom Uma is to be married, to say to it?'

'He's one of those spineless good fellows who have no such worries as opinions of their own. Every woman of Bengal is for him a special masterpiece of the Creator. This kind of human rubbish has to be thrown out of the inner circle, and the most suitable dustbin for them is marriage.'

'If these mutual attractions cause you so much misgiving, why group the sexes together at all?'

'Because I've no use either for ascetics who mortify their bodies with sackcloth and ashes or for self-immolators who reduce to ashes their natural passions. We want fire-worshippers, but if any of these kindle the fire within themselves, they have to be got rid of. Our conflagration must rage throughout the land, and that cannot be achieved with those whose fire has gone out, or those who cannot control their own flame.'

Ela had been gravely listening to his words. Now she dropped her eyes and murmured, 'Let me leave you, then.'

'How can you expect me to put up with such a loss?'

'I suspect you do not know me.'

'Who says I don't? Did I not notice it the very day a tinge of colour crept into your white *khadi* homespun? That told me of the rosy dawn within. Am I blind to how your ears are astrain for the first sound of certain footsteps? When I came into your room last Friday, could I not feel that it was someone else you were expecting?'

Ela kept silent, reddening to the tips of her ears.

'You love someone,' pursued Indranath. 'What of it? Your heart's not made of stone. I know who it is you love. In that also I see nothing to be ashamed of.'

Ela was remembering the day five years ago, when, at a gathering at her uncle's house, she had first casually met Indranath. Overcoming her natural reserve, she had begged him to give her some of his work to do, and he had offered to put her in charge of a high school for girls, just started in Calcutta. He had said: 'The only promise I ask of you is never to become entangled in any social relationship. You are not for society, but for your country alone!'

'I promise,' she had answered simply.

'You gave us the injunction exclusively to

devote ourselves to our duties. Is that possible in all circumstances?' she now asked.

'It mayn't be possible for every one. But you're not the girl to sink your pledge by overloading it with a love affair.'

'But—'

'There's no "But". You simply can't be let off.'

'And yet you know I do practically no work for you.'

'I never expected you would. It's not work I want of you. Of course, it is hardly possible for you yourself to know of the glory that lights up the hearts of the boys at the touch of your fingers when you anoint their foreheads with the red sandal-paste of initiation. How can the dry rewards I have to offer evoke the same quality of work? Where sex works I put woman on a pedestal.'

'I'll not keep anything from you. This love of mine is day by day overshadowing my love for all else.'

'Love as much as you like. Only the incurably immature revel in calling their country "Mother". Our country is not the Mother of senile infants. She is half God and half Goddess. Her fitting worship is in the coming together of

man and woman, but such union should not be enervated by imprisonment within the bars set up by society.'

'Why then is poor Uma—?'

'Uma! Kalu! Are they fit to bear unscathed the scorching flame of the larger love? There's nothing for it but to pack them off to the cremation ground of matrimony. But enough of this. Did I not hear that a burglar entered your room night before last?'

'Yes, a man suddenly came in.'

'Did your *jiujutsu* training stand you in good stead?'

'Well, I sent him off with a dislocated wrist.'

'You felt no pricks of sympathy when you did that to him?'

'I might have, had I not been afraid of being assaulted. I couldn't have given the final twist if I'd seen any signs of retreat.'

'Did you recognize him?'

'No, it was too dark to see his face.'

'Had you seen it, you'd have found him to be Anadi.'

'Oh, what a shame! Our Anadi? But he's a mere boy.'

'I sent him.'

'You! What on earth for?'

'To test both you and him.'

'What a horrible thing to do!'

'I was in a room below, and set his wrist for him then and there. You plume yourself on your sympathy with suffering. I wanted to show you how out of place that is in a situation of danger. When I asked you to shoot a kid the other day, you said you couldn't. The other girl, your cousin, did it—to show off. She laughed when the kid rolled over with a broken leg, to make out that she didn't care. But her laugh was hysterical, and she had no sleep that night. Had it been a tiger coming after you, would you have hesitated to shoot to kill? It's because I can clearly visualize the tiger that I have ceased to have any use for pity or compunction. The advice given by Sri Krishna to Arjuna, in the *Gita,* to fight, did not mean that he was to be cruel, but simply to be undeterred by softer sentiments in carrying out his high purpose. You see the point?'

'I do.'

'If you do, let me ask you a question. You love Atin, do you not?'

Ela made no reply.

'Well, suppose he became a source of danger to our cause, could you kill him?'

'I can say "yes" without hesitation, because I know that to be impossible.'

'But if it did become possible?'

'Whatever I may say now, can one really know oneself to the end?'

'It's with just such certainty that you'll have to know yourself.'

'I know one thing for certain. You've selected me by mistake.'

'On the contrary, I'm certain I made no mistake.'

'I humbly beg of you, Master, at least release Atin.'

'Who am I to release him? He remains bound by his own resolve. I know he'll never be rid of his doubts. At every step finer feelings will be hurt. And yet his self-respect will keep him on till the end.'

A deep voice called out from outside, 'Is that you, brother?'

'Come in, Kanai, come in!' cried Indranath.

Kanai Gupta entered the room. He was a short thickset man of middle age. His forehead was bald. His face bristled with a week's growth of beard which he had been too busy to shave. It was long since his homespun *dhoti* and wrap

had been washed. The chief purpose of his tea-shop was the feeding of the organization.

Ela rose to depart. Indranath turned to her, saying: 'Ela, let me tell you just one thing more before you go. I constantly speak disparagingly of you to the members of our band. I've gone to the length of warning them that some day it may become necessary to cause you to disappear without a trace! I've complained that you're making Atin break away from us, and that one break will break something else.'

'Why help to make this true,' replied Ela, 'by continually saying it? Who knows, I may be a misfit here.'

'In spite of that, I don't mistrust you, and yet I disparage you before them. Rumour has it that you have no enemy. But I've found most of your professed admirers eager to hear all I say against you.'

'They listen to you, Master, on account of their liking for this kind of talk, not because of any dislike for me.'

'Enough of this for the present,' broke in Kanai. 'Sister Ela, if I've been at the bottom of the breaking up of your tea-party, I ask your pardon. The time is near when my tea-shop itself will have to be padlocked. Perhaps it may

reappear as a barber's shop two or three hundred miles away.'

As she left the room Ela paused at the door to turn and say: 'I shall remember your words, Master, and keep myself ready. Should the day come for causing me to disappear, I will silently vanish.'

'Why so disturbed, Kanai?' asked Indranath when Ela had gone.

'The other day,' said Kanai, 'some ruffianly youths were talking heroics, sitting at that table facing the street. The very tone of their voices proclaimed them to be pet calves of John Bull himself. I promptly made a report to the police, with quotations of their seditious talk.'

'You're sure you didn't misread them, Kanai?'

'They were loud in their demand for drowning the Satanic Government in torrents of blood. If they were mere fools, they were bound to get into trouble sooner or later; if they were pure knaves, no one can hurt a hair of their heads—my report will but get them promotion. Another evening, when I was counting my till, up comes a dusty fellow in tattered clothes. asking me in a whisper for twenty-five rupees for going to our centre at Dinajpur; and he actually mentioned our Uncle Mathur's name. I jumped up shouting,

"How dare you, you impudent scroundrel! I'll hand you over to the police this minute." Had I the time, I'd have completed the farce by dragging him to the police station. Your boys who were drinking tea in the other room were furiously indignant with me. They started to go through their pockets to raise a subscription for the fellow, but couldn't collect more than thirteen annas among them. By then he had made himself scarce.'

'I see that the smell of the mess you've been cooking has escaped through some hole in the lid, and the flies have begun to buzz around.'

'No doubt about it. Now, brother, is the time to scatter your boys and, moreover, to provide each of them with some ostensible means of livelihood.'

'True enough, but have you made any plans?'

'Long ago. I've not only devised means, but also gathered materials. Madhab Kaviraj, the Indian physician, sells a lot of his 'Fever Destroyer Pellets'—mostly made up of quinine. I have taken over his stock and changed the label to 'Malaria-killer Tablets'. The quinine must be supplemented by plenty of verbiage. Let Pratul Sen, that glib orator, carry them about in a canvas bag in the capacity of salesman. Your

medical doctor, Tarini, can proceed to make life miserable for his acquaintances by touting for subscriptions to build a temple to Sitala, goddess of smallpox. The point is, you must hide your boys under some kind of trashy work or other.'

Indranath laughed. 'Your eloquence,' he said, 'makes me want to take up some business myself, if only to get acquainted with the methods and psychology of insolvency.'

'The business you have already in hand, brother,' retorted Kanai, 'is making for bankruptcy, sure enough. But what's the use of discussing that now? A question has occurred to me which I should like to ask you. You admit, I suppose, that beauty like Ela's is not to be seen every day?'

'Of course I do.'

'Then how is it you're not afraid of keeping her amongst your boys?'

'My dear Kanai, you should have known me better by this time. One who fears fire cannot use fire. I can't afford to leave fire out of my work.'

'That's to say, you don't care whether the fire you play with burns up your work or not!'

'The Creator Himself plays with fire. He doesn't count on certainties. This boy, Atin, has

joined us for love of Ela. He holds within him dynamite that may at any time explode disastrously. That's why I'm so curious to see how he shapes.'

'Look here, brother, we only do the sweeping and dusting in your terrible laboratory. If any of your gases should burst its bottle, it's our fate that will be torn to pieces.'

'Why, then, don't you resign and leave us?'

'Because it was some agent of yours who taught us to believe that it's the Elixir of Life you're after, and we poor fools are here because we still have expectations of tangible results. You look on the work as a gambler, we as sober business men. I pray you, don't end up with the practical joke of making a bonfire of our carefully kept books of account. Every pice entered there, I tell you, means a drop of our heart's blood.'

'It's not possible for me to hold on to any blind belief, Kanai. I've long given up thinking in terms of victory and defeat. As leader in a grand enterprise I'm here because it becomes me; either victory or defeat will be equally great. They tried to make me petty by closing the doors on every side. I'm determined to show them that I'm great, even if that entails disaster at

every step. You can see for yourself, Kanai, how these followers have come round me at my call, recking nothing of life or death. Why? Because I know how to call. That's what I want to make clear to myself and to others; and, after that, I don't care what happens. You, also, Kanai, once looked very ordinary on the outside, but I've brought out your extraordinary self. I've put the force of fire in you—that's what my laboratory is for. What more can you want? On a historical view, the epic may seem to end in a vast burial ground of defeat. Still it would be an epic. For the curtailed manhood of this slave-ridden country, isn't it the greatest of opportunities to be able to die the death of a hero?'

'I don't know, brother, how you led me, a plain, unimaginative, practical man, into the thick of this madhouse dance of yours. It's a mystery to me.'

'This power I have over all of you, because I never came to you as a beggar. I didn't ask you to come in under any delusion, nor lure you by any prospect of gain. I called on you to join my forlorn hope, not to show any particular results, but to prove your valour. My temperament is impersonal, so that I can submit cheerfully to the inevitable. And of whom am I to

beg and pray that India may be spared its fate while it continues to worship with sandal-paste and vermilion the very germs of its own ruination? Mine is the dispassionate scientific attitude which tells me that if the reasons for decay are left uncured, death must ensue. Yet even in the face of all the signs of impending death, I will not allow dejection to enter my soul.'

'But what about the rest of us?'

'Are the rest of you so many children? If your ship has split her bottom in mid-ocean, do you suppose you can save her by wailing and supplication?'

'What's to happen to us if we can't?'

'But was it not you yourselves who, knowing her condition, set full sail into the storm, without a tremor in your hearts? With the few of you who will stay on with me to the last, I'll count sinking a victory. Doesn't the *Gita* tell us our concern is with the doing of our duty, not with the results?'

'Are you so impersonal that you never feel anger?'

'Anger against whom?'

'Against the British.'

'I've travelled all over the continent of Europe,

and also known the people of England. I feel that the Britishers are the greatest of Westerners. I don't say they never commit atrocities under the influence of greed or lust for power, but they cannot do so whole-heartedly. They are ashamed when they do it. Their worst fear is that they'll have to explain their conduct to their great men at home. So they try to delude themselves, as well as their masters. That's why I can't raise my anger against them to the pitch that will generate steam.'

'You are a strange man!'

'They had the power completely to crush out our manhood, but their better nature did not allow them to do it. For that I cannot but admire their manhood. No doubt that manhood is deteriorating by the continued exercise of irresponsible power all over their empire, and in such deterioration are being sown the seeds of their own downfall.'

'If you don't hate your opponents as enemies, I can't understand how you can raise your hand to smite them.'

'Just as I lift my pickaxe to hit a stone that blocks my way without getting into a passion over it. It's not the question whether the British are good or bad. Their rule is one of foreign

exploitation, killing our very souls within us. I only show human intelligence by trying to get rid of this unnatural situation.'

'And yet you've no hope of certain success.'

'But need I, therefore, lower myself, even if before me there is nothing certain save death? Rather should the prospect of defeat impel us at least to assert our manhood. To my mind that is our first and last duty.'

CHAPTER TWO

Ela was sitting in a lounge chair by the window, a cushion supporting her back, one knee over the other, busy writing. She had on a purple *sari* of homespun, tolerated as a useful working garment for domestic use. On her wrists were bangles of red-lacquered conchshell, round her neck a chain of gold. Her body, with its ivory sheen, was taut and trim in its shapeliness. She looked very young indeed, but her expression was one of grave maturity. Along one of the walls there was a narrow iron cot, with a green homespun counterpane over the bed. The floor was covered with a coarse cotton carpet. On a small table near her chair were an inkstand and a small brass bowl with a sprig of gardenia.

Darkness came on, and she was on the point of rising to light the lamp, when the curtain in the doorway was violently thrust aside, with a shout of 'Elie!' and Atin burst into the room like a gust of wind.

Startled into sudden gladness, Ela chided him: 'Oh, you barbarian! How dare you come in so?'

Atin dropped down at Ela's feet as he replied, 'Life is too short, and etiquette too long.'

'I'm not yet really dressed.'

'So much the better. That makes you fit in with my state. Once I was a gentleman, immaculately attired. It was you who stripped me of my trimmings. How do you like my present dress?'

'I can't find any word for it. Is that zig-zag pattern down the front of your tunic an advertisement of your own needlework?'

'No. I didn't dare give this tunic to a tailor, for he, at least, can't have lost all self-respect.'

'Why didn't you give it to me?'

'Aren't you busy enough repairing the new age, not to be burdened with a tunic besides?'

'What makes you cleave to this particular garment?'

'Why does a man cleave to his wife? Because it's the only one he has.'

'Whatever do you mean, Ontu! Have you only this one tunic left?'

'Well, in my previous style of living, I used to have tunics large in number and varied in pattern. Then came the flood in our country. Do you remember your speech? You said: "In this tear-flooded day of disaster when so many

of our countrywomen lack even a single piece of cloth to cover their shame, the shame is theirs who keep for themselves clothes in excess of their needs." I hadn't then the courage to laugh openly. I merely smiled to myself, for I knew that in your wardrobe you had clothes far beyond your actual needs. But, of course, if a girl has fifty dresses of fifty hues, each one is an absolute necessity. When I laid at your feet a trunk filled with all my clothes, you clapped your hands in delight.'

'What a shame, Ontu! You should have told me.'

'Don't you worry. The situation is not so tragic. I kept two coloured tunics for everyday use, which I wear and wash in turn. I have two others put away for emergencies.'

Ela playfully pushed away Atin's head as she said, 'What is this madness come over you these days?'

'It's been coming on ever since that day we met. The days that do not rise to the height of fulfilment are doomed to such ghostly wanderings on the horizon of the might-have-been. There lies the mirage of a bridal chamber in which our union was to be. I've come to invite you to it. Your work may be disturbed.'

'Bother the work!' said Ela, letting her writing-board slide to the floor as she started to rise. 'I'll light the lamp.'

'No, don't. Light can only show reality. I want to take you along the unlighted road to the yet-unrealized. It's now almost four years since I was crossing the river at Mokameh Ghat on the ferry steamer. I was still holding to the remnants of my ancestral fortune, full of debt-made holes. Luxurious tastes still clung to me like the cloud colours of declining day. Clad in a silk tunic, a scarf of old-gold *muga* neatly folded on my shoulder, I was sitting alone in a cane chair on the first-class deck. You had cast in your lot with "the people" as a deck passenger. All of a sudden, you came up and stood right in front of me. The golden brown of your *sari* is still vivid in my mind. The end was drawn up over the back of your head, fixed to the coil of your hair with a pin, swelling to the breeze on either side of your face. With strained naturalness you asked me, "Why don't you wear *khadi*?" Do you remember?'

'Very clearly.'

'I want to recall the whole of that day—you'll have to listen.'

'Only too gladly. It is the refrain of my new

life. My heart wants to go back to it over and over again.'

'The music of your voice thrilled me through and through. It struck me like a sudden shaft of light. Could I have become indignant at this unheard-of impertinence from a strange girl, I'd have followed the usual path of fashionable society to the end of my days. But vanity is the best part of my nature; so I jumped to the conclusion that, if the girl hadn't specially liked me, she would never have come to reprove me. Tell me, wasn't I right?'

'Haven't I told you often enough, you greedy boy, how I had been gazing and gazing at you from my corner of the third-class deck, regardless of whether anybody was watching me or not? That was a most wonderful experience of life-long intimacy felt at first sight. "Whence comes this strange being," asked my heart, "so much bigger than his sorroundings, a lotus flower amongst water weeds?" I was at once filled with the determination to draw near to me this rare creature—not only near to me, but near to all of us.'

'It was my evil fate that made your resolve plural.'

'I had no choice, Ontu. I had already sworn

to devote myself to my country, not to keep anything for myself alone. My betrothal was to my country.'

'This pledge of yours was a crime and, every day you keep it, you commit a fresh outrage against your own nature. To crush under the heels of your party a feeling which is of the purest, which comes by command of the Creator Himself, is a sin for which you'll have to take punishment.'

'There is no end of this, Ontu! It tortures me day and night. Supreme good fortune, not to be won by any striving, an unmasked gift of the gods, was vouchsafed to me, and I could not accept it. Heart linked to heart, and yet the unbearable pangs of widowhood—may fate never inflict this suffering on any other woman! I had been from my childhood spell-bound within conventional barriers, but at the very first sight of you my heart said, "Let all barriers be broken". I could never have imagined such a revolution within myself. I used to be proud of my success in controlling my feelings. That pride I have lost. Look within me and you'll see my surrender. You are the hero, I your captive.'

'I also have owned defeat at the hands of my

captive, a defeat not yet come to an end. At every moment there is my struggle and my defeat.'

'When I had that first wonderful vision of you, Ontu, on the first-class deck, I was still full of the newly-born patriotic pride in going third-class. On changing into the train you took a second-class ticket. My whole being was drawn to the same class. A trick even occurred to me. I would board your compartment at the last moment, and say I was led into the mistake in my hurry. In our old poems it's the woman who always goes to keep tryst with her lover. The poets have done us this favour out of pity, knowing how impossible that is in society-ridden real life. Our unsanctioned desires go round and round in the darkness of their confinement within us, knocking their heads against the walls. Such desires women do not acknowledge except to themselves. You have made me acknowledge them to you.'

'Why have you done so?'

'I haven't been able to give you anything else.'

Atin suddenly clasped both of Ela's hands in his own, and asked bitterly: 'Why couldn't you? What prevented you from accepting me? society? caste?'

'For shame, Ontu, never think of such a thing! There was nothing outside. The obstacle was within me.'

'Does that mean that you do not love me enough?'

' "Enough" has no meaning here, Ontu. Don't despise me for being weak if I can't move mountains. I had sworn not to marry. Even if I hadn't sworn it, marriage wouldn't have been possible for me.'

'Why not?'

'Don't be angry with me, Ontu! My love itself would have stood in the way. So destitute am I, I feel I have not enough to offer you.'

'Tell me more plainly.'

'I've told you so often!'

'Tell me once more. I want to finish all our telling to-night. I'll never ask again.'

A voice outside called, 'Sister, dear!'

'Is that you, Akhil? Come in,' said Ela.

A boy entered. A handsome, obstinate-looking, mischievous face; dishevelled curly hair; light-brown complexion of an infantile softness; restless eyes aglow. He wore a khaki jacket unbuttoned at the neck, and khaki shorts, their pockets bulging with all kinds of litter, including a horn-handled jack-knife.

Akhil was an orphan, a distant cousin of Ela's. As he entered, he made a shamefaced attempt to salute her formally by touching her feet.

'Are'nt you going to greet your brother Atin, too?' admonished Ela.

Akhil turned his back on Atin, without reply. Atin laughed as he patted Akhil's shoulder. 'Well done!' he said. 'If you must bend your head, let it be before a single divinity.'

'Don't listen to him, Akhil,' said Ela ; 'go on with what you want to say.'

'To-morrow is the day of mother's death.'

'So it is. Do you wish to invite any one to the rites of observance?'

'No.'

'Then what is it you want?'

'I want three days off from my studies.'

'What will you do with your holiday?'

'I want to make a rabbit hutch.'

'You haven't any rabbits left, why bother about a hutch?'

Atin smiled as he interposed: 'Rabbits can be imagined. The real thing is the making of the hutch.'

'All right, Akhil, you may have three days off,' said Ela.

Without another word Akhil was out of the room at a run.

'I've been quite unable to tame him,' said Atin. 'There's a third party dividing us. But let that be. Now for your explanation. What made you keep me at a distance?'

'Why can't you remember one simple thing —that I am older than you?'

'Because I can't forget the simple thing that you are twenty-eight, and I am a few months over twenty-eight.'

'My twenty-eight is far more than yours. At your age all the wicks of the lamp of youth are burning brightly. You still have your window open to unrealized, unthought-of possibilities.'

'Elie, you don't understand me simply because you won't. Don't go on saying that the unrealized is yet to come in my life. It has already come—it is you. And yet it's still unrealized. Shall I have to keep my window expectantly open forever? Through its emptiness only the wail of my yearning heart goes forth, "I want you, only you!" And no reply comes.'

'Oh, ungrateful! How can you say that you've had no reply? I also want you, you, you!

And there's nothing I want more in all the world. Only, our meeting happened at a time when it could not be auspiciously carried further.'

'Why, what harm would it have done to carry it on to union?'

'My life, indeed, would have been fulfilled, but what a trifle that is! You aren't like the others, but ever so much above them. And it's because I kept my distance that I was privileged to see this wonderful greatness of yours. I'm mortally afraid even to think of swathing you round with my smallness, of bringing you down to the pettinesses which make up my little household. There may be women who would have no compunction in smothering you under the numberless details of their lives. I know of so many tragedies which such women have brought about —monarchs of the forest stunted under a tangle of clinging creepers—as if their embraces are all-sufficient.'

'Elie! Only he who receives can say what is, or is not, all-sufficient.'

'I refuse to live in a false paradise. I know you, Ontu, better than you do yourself. Pent in the narrow cage of my love, you'd soon have begun to beat your wings. The little of satisfaction I have in me to offer, you'd have by now

drained to the dregs. Then you'd have found out my utter destitution. That's why I gave up all my personal claims on you and surrendered you completely at the shrine of our country. There your gifts will not lack full scope.'

Atin's eyes flashed. He got up and began to pace up and down the room. Then, standing in front of Ela, he said: 'The time has come to talk to you straight and hard. What right have you, let me ask, to deliver me up to the country, or to any one else? Your offering to me could have been something beautiful—call it service, call it favour, as you will—and according to your mood I'd have come to you, proudly if you had allowed pride, humbly if such had been your pleasure. But you cut down your gift to paltriness. Your woman's glory you had to bestow, but that you cast aside and offered instead to place the country in my hands! That you can't do, positively cannot—no one can. The country cannot be passed from hand to hand like this.'

Ela winced at this blow to her self-assurance. 'What are you talking about?' she murmured.

'I'm saying that the realm of sweetness and light which has woman for its centre may appear small on an outward view, but, within, its depth

is immeasurable. It's by no means a cage. But the place you've assigned me, calling it country —which after all is nothing but a country of your band's own make—whatever it may mean to others, it's nothing but a cage for me. My natural powers do not find full scope in it; they are becoming unhealthy and perverted. I'm ashamed of what I'm doing, but I find the way out blocked. You don't seem to realize how my wings have been clipped, my limbs shackled. I had the responsibility, as well as the capacity, to take my own true place in my country's service. You made me forget it.'

'What did I do to make you forget, Ontu?'

'I'll admit a thousand times that you can make me forget all else but you; had it not been so, I'd have doubted my own manliness.'

'Why then reproach me?'

'After making me forget myself, you should have taken me into your own realm, your own world. Instead of that you merely echoed the words of your band and showed me "the one and only way!" And, going round and round in the pursuit of my official duties over that cement road of yours, the whole current of my life is being stirred into muddiness."

'Official duties?'

"'Yes, the duty of pulling at the car of Juggernaut's. Our Supreme Counsellor decreed that our whole duty was to take hold of a thick rope and keep pulling with closed eyes. Thousands of boys caught hold of the ropes. Some were crushed under the wheels, others crippled for life. Then came the order to turn back. The car began its return journey. But the broken bones did not become whole, and the cripples were swept out of the way on to the dust heaps. Independent thinking was knocked on the head from the very start and the boys came strutting up, ready and proud to be moulded into puppets. When they all began to dance to the same tune, at the wire-pulling of the Master, they were struck with admiration at their own performance. "Verily the dance of *Sakti* (Power)!"—thought they. But, whenever the Master slackens his pull, thousands of the puppet-boys fall out of the dance.'

'The boys themselves spoil it by trying to do their own steps, out of time.'

'They should have known from the first that live men cannot play the puppet for long. To ignore man's nature by trying to make him a puppet is folly. Had you respected me for my

own individuality you would have drawn me not to your group, but to your heart!'

'Why, oh, why, Ontu, didn't you drive me away at the very beginning? Why did you make me guilty of doing you this injury?'

'That is what I've been trying to tell you. I desired union with you—a very simple desire, a most ungovernable desire. I found the usual way closed. I desperately entrusted my life to a crooked way. I have now come to know that it will lead me to my death. When at last I am dead to my real self, your outstretched arms will beseech me, by day and by night, to return to the equally dead emptiness of your bosom . . . . I am talking like a fool, I know, a romantic fool. As if the getting of a shadow, without body or substance, is getting at all. As if your agony at our separation then, could pay the price of our frustrated union to-day!'

'The intoxication of words has got hold of you, now, Ontu!'

'Got hold of me now? It has always possessed me. Such a word-ridden creature has this Atin of yours always been! But I've lost all hope that you'll ever know him for what he really is—now that you've gone and made him one of the pawns in the game started by your precious band.'

Ela slipped down from her chair and laid her head on Atin's feet. Atin drew her up beside him as he continued: 'With words have I decorated this slim, dainty body of yours in my own mind—my joy and my sorrow in one—what have I not called you! I'm surrounded by an invisible atmosphere, an atmosphere of words—they come down around me from the Elysium of literature to save me from the crowd. Ever aloof am I, and that your Master knows. Why, then, does he trust me, I wonder!'

'He trusts you for that very reason. To mingle with the crowd one has to come down to the crowd. But come down you cannot. That's why I, too, trust you. No woman ever so trusted any man. Had you been an ordinary man, then like an ordinary woman I'd have been afraid of you. But there's no place for fear in your company.'

'A curse upon such fearlessness! You can't know a man unless you fear him. You claim desperate courage for winning the country, why not for winning your glorious self? Oh, why did I not desperately snatch you away long ago, while there was yet time! Good breeding? But love is barbarous. Its barbarity is for cutting a

way through mountainous obstacles. It's a wild torrent, not a tame water-pipe—'

Ela suddenly rose to her feet. 'Come, Atin,' said she, 'let's go down to the other room.'

'Afraid!' cried Atin, as he also stood up. 'So at last you're afraid! Then the victory is mine. In the depths of me I'm a man, an impetuous barbarian. Had I not lost my opportunity, I'd have crushed you in my embrace, making your ribs ache; I'd not have given you the time to think—not left the breath in you to sob out a protest; I'd have pitilessly dragged you along the road to my own fastness! But the road on which I've actually arrived is narrow as a razor's edge, with no room for two, side by side—'

'Oh, my barbarian! You won't have to snatch me—take me, take me, take me!' cried Ela. With outstretched arms she flung herself on his breast and raised her face to his. As suddenly she recoiled. Through the window her glance fell on the street below. 'Oh, look!' she whispered with a shudder. 'He's there!'

'Who? Where?' asked Atin.

'There, at the corner. It's Batu. He's sure to be coming here. My whole being shrinks in disgust when I come across this odious creature—there's something so fleshy, so slimy about

him. The look in his eyes insults me from a distance.'

'Don't worry about him, Ela. Why not dismiss him from your thoughts altogether?'

'I can't, I'm so afraid of him. And it's not only for myself—my fears are more for you, for I know that his jealousy has its snake's hood raised to strike.'

'These beasts have no courage, Ela. Only a bad smell. At bottom the fellow's afraid of me ; not for anything he thinks I may do to him, but because he feels I belong to a different species.'

'Ontu, I have imagined all kinds of evil and suffering that may come upon me, and am prepared for everything except falling, by some trick of fate, into this man's clutches. I'd die any death first.' Ela clung to Atin's arm, as though need for rescue was imminent. 'Listen! here he is, coming right up.'

Atin went out on the landing, saying loudly: 'Not here, Batu. Let's go down to the sitting room. Sister Ela's dressing now.'

'I want just one word with her.'

'She told me she doesn't want any one to come to her room till she's ready.'

'Except you—?'

'Except me.'

Batu smiled a derisive smile. 'We old boys,' said he, 'have all this time been kept doing the ordinary chapters of grammar. You, the new-comer, get on at one jump to Poetic License! Exceptions are slippery things; their vogue, let me warn you, doesn't last long.' With this, Batu quickly ran downstairs.

A moment later Akhil came up, swinging a small saw in one hand and holding out the other. 'A letter,' he said. 'I was told to put it in your own hands.'

'Who told you?'

'I don't know him.' The letter delivered, Akhil was off.

Opening the envelope, Atin saw a note written on red paper—a danger signal. It was in code. He deciphered it to read: 'Don't stay any longer in Ela's house. Come away at once, without a word to her.'

Atin in self-respect could not disregard the command of one whose authority he had acknowledged. According to rule he tore the note into little pieces. For a moment he lingered; then he was out of the house with rapid strides, and with a bound boarded a passing tram-car.

CHAPTER THREE

A VERDANT MASS of trees, creepers and undergrowth, the light green, dark green, yellow green and brown green of their foliage jostling one another; in their shade a pool of water, choked with rotting leaves; along its edge a winding village lane, deeply rutted by cart wheels. The lane is fringed with cactus, yam and wild flowering shrubs, with occasional palisades of live *seora* stakes. Through gaps, here and there, glimpses of fields are to be seen, the young rice shoots just showing through the water held by mud embankments. Here, at some little distance beyond, overgrown by jungle, is a long-deserted hundred-and-fifty-year-old house, popularly believed to have come under a curse, and to be haunted by the ghost of some matricide. No living claimant has since ventured to dispute its ownership with this bodiless possessor. Our scene is the *puja dalan*—the room set apart for family worship and religious ceremonies—of this tumbledown house.

Into this secluded retreat of Atin's there entered, toward the close of the day, old Kanai Gupta. Atin was startled at the sight of him, for

Kanai was not supposed even to be aware of his whereabouts. 'You here,' he stammered.

'I've come a-spying,' returned Kanai.

'Please explain the joke,' said Atin, mystified.

'There's no joke. When my tea-shop fell under Saturn's baleful influence, I, your humble purveyor, had to fare forth. But the baleful eyes of the authorities did not cease to follow me wherever I went. As a last resort, I had to enter my name in their Spy Register. Those of us with no way left but to the cremation ground, find in this line a grand trunk road from one end of the country to the other.'

'So, instead of making tea, you're making news.'

'This profession can't be carried on with made-up news. You have to supply the real article. But I tighten the knot only when the prey is already netted. After they got ninety-nine per cent of information about your Haren, I supplied the superfluous remainder. He's now reposing in the Government Rest House at Jalpaiguri.'

'My turn this time, I suppose?'

'Very near it. Batu has advanced it most of the way. The little that remains in my hands

may get you some respite. You remember how you lost your diary in your old quarters?'

'Remember? I should think I do!'

'It was sure to fall into the hands of the police some day, so I had to steal it.'

'So it was you!'

'Yes, fortune favours him whose cause is just. You were writing in it one day, as I came in. On some pretext I managed to get you away for five minutes. That was enough for me.'

'You read the whole of it!' cried Atin, with a gesture of despair.

'Certainly I did. It took me upto one o'clock in the morning. I must admit I didn't know before what force and charm there is in the Bengali language. Secrets there were, to be sure, but they didn't touch the British Government.'

'Was it right of you—?'

'I can't tell you how right it was! You have the literary gift, and, though you gave no names or details, your disillusionment and contempt came out in letters of fire. Had it come from the pen of any government favour-seeker he would straightway have attained the heaven of advancement. Had not Batu been after you, this document might have averted the evil eye of the authorities. I honestly feel that brother

Indranath has deprived the country by entangling you in his band."

'Does the band know of your latest profession?'

'Not one of them.'

'Not even the Master?'

'He's clever, and may have some inkling of it. But neither has he asked me, nor have I told him.'

'What made you tell me then?'

'That's the strange part of it. Those who have to make their livelihood out of mistrust would get choked if they couldn't get some one at least to confide in. I am not a fool, neither am I sentimental, so I don't keep a diary. Had I done so, nothing would have relieved my feelings like placing it in your hands.'

'Don't you confide in the Master?'

'To him one can make reports, but not open one's heart. I may be Indranath's chief adviser, but I don't know all about what he's doing. There are things I don't even dare guess at. It's my belief that when Indranath wishes to get rid of any one of his own traitors he gets him buried in the police refuse heap. That may be a betrayal, but not a crime. I warn you, if you ever come to find the handcuffs on you, that'll either be my

doing or his—anyway I hope you'll take it in good part! The news of your transfer here was first hinted to the whispering department of Law and Order by Batu. So I had to go one better by furnishing them with a photograph of the place.

'Now to business. All I can get you is twenty-four hours' time to clear out. If after that you're still here, I myself will have to put you on the road to the police station. I've written out for you in full how to get to your next destination. You know the code. Commit the directions to memory and tear up the paper. Here's a sketch map of the place. On this side of the road is the room you'll live in—it's in one corner of the schoolhouse. On the opposite side of the road is the police station. The Head Constable in charge is some sort of grandnephew of mine. His name is Raghubir. I call him Raghab, the killer fish. You've been appointed a teacher of Bengali. This Raghab will come over, now and then, and rummage your things; he may also give you a poke or two with his baton. Take it all as God's own mercy. His people have lived for generations in the upper provinces, and this fellow lets his contempt for the Bengal-born find unrestrained expression in his adopted language.

Don't you make the faintest attempt to talk back, and for the life of you don't try to return home. I'm leaving my bicycle outside. When you hear the signal, jump on it in the twinkling of an eye. Now, my child, a last embrace.'

They embraced, and Kanai vanished.

Atin sat awhile in silent thought, looking withinwards. The last act of his life's drama had been brought on out of its time; the curtain would soon be rung down, the lights put out. His start had been made in the clear light of dawn, since when he had travelled very far. The vision of a woman's beauty that had been revealed to him at the bend of the road by the goddess of his fortunes, was not of this world. It was the inspiration of history working within him that had made Atin, like Dante, throw himself into the vortex of political revolt. But where was the truth, the valour, the glory in it? From the mire of masked robberies and murder into which the movement had progressively been drawn, no pillar of light would ever rise to illumine the pages of history. With his God-given gifts destroyed, Atin could now see no prospect of fruition before him, but rather the certain vanquishment of his self. Defeat has its value, but not the defeat of soul that brings in

its train ghastly doings underground; unmeaning, unending . . . .

The daylight waned. The cicadas shrilled in the courtyard. The wheels of a distant cart creaked their agony.

Suddenly into his room came Ela, with rapid steps, in a blind hurry, like that of a suicide taking the final plunge. As Atin jumped up, she threw herself on his breast, sobbing, 'Ontu, Ontu, I couldn't keep away any longer!'

Atin gently disengaged her arms and, placing her before him, silently gazed at her tearful face, as he said, 'What's this you've done, Elie?'

'I don't know—I didn't know what I was doing.'

'But how did you come to know where I am?'

'*You* didn't tell me,' said Ela, with a world of reproach in her voice.

'He who has told you is no friend of yours.'

'Of that I've no doubt either; but to live in the emptiness of not knowing the way to you became so unbearable, I cared not whether I got it from friend or foe. What ages have passed since I saw you last!'

'Elie, you are wonderful!'

'It's you who are wonderful, Ontu. How easily could you obey the mandate to cease to see me!'

'That was my ingrained pride. Tremendous longing crushed me in its coils day and night, but I wouldn't give in. They had put me down as sentimental; they were so certain that in the day of trial I'd be found to be made of clay! It was beyond them to understand that in my sentiments lay my strength.'

'The Master understands, Ontu.'

'But Elie, you've broken the rules by coming here.'

'I know, Ontu. I admit my weakness. Yet it wasn't for my own need alone, but for yours, too. Every day my heart told me you were calling me. Not to respond to your call would have suffocated me. Tell me, Ontu, aren't you glad that I came?'

'So glad am I that I'm ready to risk punishment for it!'

Ela took a turn round the room. A blanket spread on the floor, with a mat over it, served as a bed. A canvas bag filled with books had taken the place of a pillow. A packing case did duty as a writing desk. In a corner was a water jar with an earthen pot for a lid. A tattered

basket contained a bunch of bananas and an enamel-ware goblet with the enamel chipped off in places, which could be used as a tea-cup on the rare occasions when any tea was to be had. At the other end of the room was a huge wooden chest with a clay image of the elephant-headed Ganesha resting on it. A musty smell of dampness pervaded the stagnant atmosphere of the whole room.

She found it quite impossible to adjust her mind to the idea of Atin doomed to these squalid, unclean surroundings.

Atin laughed outright. 'The sight of my wealth,' said he, 'seems to amaze you. We have to keep ourselves thoroughly mobile. Neither man nor thing must be there to clog our steps when the time comes for us to run.. A little way off there are the quarters of the jute mill operatives. They call me Master Babu. I read for them the letters they get, put the address on the letters they write, and see to it that their mutual accounts of debts and dues are in order. I get frequent gifts of milk and fruit and vegetables.'

'Whose is that big box on the other side, Ontu?'

'One is more conspicuous in a place like this, if alone; so I have let in a Marwari tradesman

who was swept into the streets by the goddess of misfortune. He is a discharged insolvent for the third time. I'm inclined to think that becoming bankrupt is his chief business. He looks on this dilapidated *dalan* as a training academy for his nephew. After breakfasting on roasted barley meal, they turn up here. They dye cheap cloths for the village women, and out of the proceeds pay the interest on the capital they've borrowed, and a part of the principal as well. Those big pots you see over there are not used by us for cooking feasts, but are for boiling the dye-stuff. The dyed cloth is kept in that box, which also contains trinkets suitable for the wives of the mill hands—glass bangles, brass bangles, combs and hand mirrors. They go out at three o'clock in the afternoon and return the next morning. Meanwhile I and the ghost act as custodians.'

'How long are you to be here?'

'Twenty-four hours, I expect.'

'What's your next address?'

'It's forbidden to tell.'

Ela had taken out the books from the canvas bag. They were mostly poetry in English and Bengali.

'I've been carrying these about all this time,' said Atin, 'so that I may not altogether forget my caste. My original abode was in the dream-land of their making; if you turn over their pages you'll find its highways and byways marked in pencil. And where am I to-day? Look around you.'

Ela sank to the ground and clasped Atin's feet. 'Forgive me, Ontu, forgive me,' she wailed.

'What have I to forgive you for, Elie? If there be a God, and if He be all-merciful, may He forgive *me*.'

'I brought you to this pass when I didn't know you for what you are.'

'My own folly brought me to the place which is not mine,' said Atin with a bitter laugh. 'Why grudge me even that much credit? I'm not in the mood to put up with your trying to make me out a minor needing your guardianship. Come down, rather, from your height; look me in the face and say, "Come, my lover, come and sit close by me, on the half of my Sari's end spread for you."'

'Maybe I would have said that, but why this mad mood of yours?'

'What can I do but flare up when you dare suggest that your lotus-stem arms dragged me forth on this road?'

'Why be angry with me for telling the truth?'

'You call that the truth! The urge within me flung me out—you were only the passive object.'

'For heaven's sake, Ontu, stop this wild talk. I'll never be able to forgive myself for drawing you away from your own way of living, uprooting you from your normal life. Why were you led to make your mistake, merely because I had made mine? Why did you risk the degradation of ceasing to earn your own living?'

'Had I not accepted suffering, you'd have turned away from me and never understood how much I loved you. Now don't try to twist this to mean love of country.'

'Had our country nothing to do with it, Ontu?'

'What I was doing for the country I was doing for you. The opportunity came to me to brave death for your sake. This you forget, and reserve all your remorse for my lost livelihood—you incorrigible housewife!'

'Yes, we women cannot bear the idea of want. Grant me at least one prayer. I inherited my father's house and I have some money put by.

I beseech you to take some of it from me. I know you are in great need.'

'Had I been so hard put to it, all kinds of ways were open to me, from writing coaching manuals to clearing dustbins.'

'I admit, Ontu, that my resources should have been spent in the service of my country. But the road to earning is blocked for us women; that's why our necessity to save is so imperative. The little store that we lay up is not only for the needs of our living, but of our love as well. Oh, could I but persuade you that whatever I have is for you!'

'On that point you'll never persuade me. The only gift I could unhesitatingly ask of you, you held back behind the bars of your pledge.

'One day you were busy casting up the accounts of the Narayanee School. I came and dropped into a seat by your side, sorely wounded at heart, as a kite, buffeted by storm, drops to the dust. I came with a mind already defeated. You didn't even look at me. I kept my longing eyes on you all the time, hoping against hope that a touch of those flowerlike fingers might be vouchsafed to heal my pangs of body and mind. But no sympathy stirred within you. Miser, even so little you were unable to give!'

Ela's eyes filled. 'You're quite impossible, Ontu,' she interrupted. 'Why need you have waited for my response? Why didn't you snatch away my account book? Couldn't you understand how your diffidence made me diffident?'

She drew Atin's head to her breast and laid her own on his, passing her fingers lightly through his hair.

After a while Atin raised his head and sat upright. Taking Ela's hand in his, he said: 'When we were on the ferry steamer from Mokameh Ghat, I hadn't understood that Grandmother Fate had merely given a mischievous tweak to my ears as she passed me by. My mind has ever since been building castles in the sky of my memory. . . .

'My servant had taken off my heavy luggage, stowed on the lower deck, to the railway station. A leather suitcase remained in my cabin. I was looking about for a coolie to carry it. Demurely you came up to me. "Waiting for a coolie?" you asked, without the suspicion of a smile. "Why? Let me carry your suitcase." And before I could make the wild protest I felt, you had caught it up. Then, with a show of compunction for my awkward plight, you added: "If you're feeling embarrassed, I'll tell you what

you can do. There's my trunk on the other deck. You may take that. Then we'll cancel each other's debt." There was nothing else to do. It was seven times heavier than mine! I kept shifting it from one hand to the other as I staggered all the way to the railway station, till I managed to put it into a third-class compartment. There was I, wet through with perspiration, my breath coming in gasps; and you with mischievous laughter in your eyes. Pity might have been lurking somewhere in your composition, but you wouldn't show it; for you had taken on yourself the burden of making a man of me!'

'Oh, stop, please stop! I feel so ashamed to think of what I then was, how silly, how ridiculous. I wonder you could tolerate me.'

'You came to me that day in a halo of illusion. The sun was setting. The lightly clouded sky was filled with the rare diffused radiance that our womenfolk call the "bride-viewing light". The smooth-flowing Ganges glowed back like a mirror. And your slim, supple figure remains forever painted in my mind against that radiant background. What happened after? I heard your call. But where did it lead me? So far, so very

far away from you. You do not even know how far.'

'Why did you not tell me, Ontu?'

'There are injunctions I have to obey. Not only that. What would be the good of telling you all? The light is getting dim, Elie. Come nearer to me. These truant, wayward locks of yours, constantly straying over your eyes, which you keep putting into place with your deft fingers; this black-bordered *tussar* sari, hanging loosely over your shoulder, with its edge over the back of your head, pinned to your hair; the trace of fatigue in your eyes, the touch of entreaty on your lips; the waning light that sinks into the vagueness of its ending. All this that I see is truth, miraculous truth.'

'What is all this you're saying, Ontu?'

'It's mostly imagination. It brings back to me how you once wanted me to go and live amongst the labouring folk. It must have been your idea to level to the dust my pride of birth. Your great enterprise amused me. I entered into the spirit of the democratic picnic. I wandered about amongst the carters, from one buffalo shed to another. I called some of them brother, others uncle. But they could see as well as I that these affectionate relations wouldn't stand

wear. There are, no doubt, great-souled men in whose voice such words strike the right note, whatever be the instrument on which they play. But our attempts at imitation sound miserably out of tune.'

'But, Ontu, I'm not yet able to understand why, when you discovered your mistake, you didn't turn back from the road which wasn't yours.'

'Before I took this road there was much I wasn't aware of, much I didn't even suspect. Then I came to know the boys, one after another —boys the dust of whose feet I'd have taken, had not they been so much younger than I! What have they not seen since, what have they not suffered, what insults they have not borne— the whole story will never see the light of day. It was the torment of all this that drove me mad. Many times have I vowed to myself: I will not be vanquished by fear or torment; I will die striking my head against the heartless stone wall, but, snapping my fingers at it, I will ignore the wall.'

'Have you then changed your mind now?'

'Listen. One who openly fights a more powerful foe, even if his be a hopeless struggle, is in the same class as his opponent; his honour

remains unsullied. I had imagined that at least that honour would be mine. But, as the days went by, I saw with my own eyes how even the most high-minded of the boys began to lose their manhood. What greater loss could there be? I knew for certain they'd only laugh at me, perhaps get angry with me, and yet I had to tell them that the worst of all defeats was to come down to the wrong-doer's level. It was for us, before we were knocked out, before we met our death, to prove ourselves the greater, as men—why else this play of pitting ourselves against immeasurably superior forces? Some of them understood me, but how few!'

'Why even then didn't you leave them?'

'How could I? The net of punishment was then closing round them. Every bit of their career had passed before my eyes. I had felt with them each heart-rending experience. So, however revolted my feelings, however strong my hate of the movement, I simply could not desert them in the moment of their greatest danger. One thing had become clear to me. To oppose overwhelming strength by brute force can but brutalize in the end one's very soul.'

'I must confess, Ontu, that lately the terrible tragedy of it has been revealed to me also. I had

entered the lists at the call of glory, but the shame of it is enveloping me more and more. Tell me, what can we do now?'

'Every man and woman is called upon to fight the great fight in the field of righteousness, where to die is to earn the highest heaven. But for us, the way to that battlefield is closed. We must now reap to the end the fruits of our past *karma*, our past deeds.'

'I understand you, Ontu, and yet the cynical way in which you talk of our patriotic movement hurts me deeply.'

'I'll confess to you for the first time to-day: what you call a patriot, that I am not. The patriotism of those who have no faith in that which is above patriotism is like a crocodile's back used as a ferry to cross the river. Meanness, unfaithfulness, mutual mistrust, secret machination, plotting for leadership—sooner or later these drag them into the mud at the bottom. That the life of the country can be saved by killing its soul, is the monstrously false doctrine that nationalists all over the world are bellowing forth stridently. My heart groans to give it effective contradiction. I had it in me, perhaps, to express it in words burning with truth, words that would have remained great through the

ages. But that has been denied me in this life. That is why the pain at my heart sometimes becomes so cruel.'

'Turn back yet, Ontu, turn back,' cried Ela, with a deep sigh.

'The way is closed.'

'But why?'

'Even if I'm on the wrong road, it has its own responsibilities to the bitter end.'

Ela put her arms round Atin's neck as she implored him: 'Turn back, Ontu. You have broken down the foundation of my faith, my refuge all these years. Now that I'm adrift I have nothing but wreckage to cling to. Rescue me and take me back with you.'

'There's no way out now. The arrow can miss the mark, but it cannot return to the quiver.'

'I offer you my hand in marriage, Ontu, as the princesses of old used to do. Take me. There's no time to lose. Let us pledge our troth by exchange of vows. Then take me as helpmate along your path.'

'Had it been a path of danger, I'd have taken you. But how can troth be pledged when Truth itself has been wrecked? But no more of this. Something true may still be left, even in this day of shipwreck. That I would hear from your lips.'

'What am I to tell you?'

'Tell me that you love me.'

'I tell you, I do love you.'

'Tell me that you'll remember I loved you, even when I have ceased to live.'

Ela's face was wet with tears. After a long pause she said: 'Take something at least from me, Ontu. Take this necklace.'

'Never! I'll not take alms of you.'

'Then take me as your companion on your own terms!'

'Don't tempt me, Ela. My way is not yours.'

'Neither is it yours, then. Turn back.'

'The way is not mine—it's I who belong to the way. No one calls the noose round his neck an ornament.'

'Know for certain, Ontu, if you cease to live, so will I. I've no one else but you. If you doubt that now, it's my own hope that somewhere, somehow, after our death, such doubt will be removed forever.'

With a sudden start Atin sprang to his feet. The thin, keen sound of a whistle, like the whine of an arrow in flight, came from the distance.

'I'm off,' he said.

'Stay—' pleaded Ela, as she held him her arms.

'No.'

'Where are you going?'

'I don't know.'

Ela slipped to the ground, still clasping him. 'I am your slave,' she moaned, 'yours to command. For mercy's sake don't leave me behind.'

Atin hesitated, but only for a moment. A second blast on the whistle was heard.

'Let me go!' he shouted. Then, tearing himself free, he disappeared.

The evening darkness had deepened. Ela lay prone on the floor, her eyes tearless, her very heart dried up, how long she knew not. A flash of light brought her to herself. A grave voice sounded in her ears. 'Ela!'

She sat up, startled. There was Indranath, electric torch in hand. She jumped up. 'Bring Atin back to me!' she cried.

'Why are you here?' said Indranath curtly.

'I knew I was facing danger when I came.'

'It's not your danger that matters,' Indranath sternly rebuked her. 'Who told you of this place?'

'Batu.'

'And you couldn't see why he told you?'

'I was unfit to understand anything.'

'Had it been wise to kill you, I'd have done so here and now. Go back to your rooms at once! There's a taxi on the road outside.'

CHAPTER FOUR

'You here again, Akhil, escaped from the boarding-house as usual! It's bad of you. How often have I told you not to be coming over here these days. You'll get into some terrible trouble if you go on like this.'

Akhil made no answer, but, dropping his voice, he said: 'Just now a man with a bushy beard climbed over the back wall into the garden. So I locked your door as I came in. Listen—you'll hear footsteps.' With this he pulled open the biggest blade of his clasp knife and stood on guard.

'Put away that knife, O you hero! Here, give it to me,' said Ela, and she took the knife from him.

'There's nothing to be afraid of, Akhil,' came a voice from the landing. 'It's I, Atin.'

Ela turned pale as she cried, 'Open the door!'

'Where's the bearded man?' asked Akhil, as he let Atin in.

'The beard's somewhere in the garden, the man's here,' replied Atin. 'Run away, Akhil, and see if you can find that beard.'

As Akhil left the room, Ela stood stiff for a moment, as if turned to stone. Then she cried: 'What have you done to yourself, Ontu? How awful you look!'

'Not exactly bewitching?'

'Then it's true! that you've been seriously ill.'

'Doctors differ, so they needn't be believed.'

'You couldn't have had any dinner, either.'

'That can wait. Let's not waste our time.'

'Oh, what made you come here, Ontu?' Ela burst out, clasping Atin's hand in dismay. 'Don't you know they're after you?'

'I don't want to disappoint them.'

'Why, Ontu, do you court certain danger like this? What is to be done now?'

'Why I've come, you shall know just before I leave. Meanwhile that's the one thing I want to forget. First let me go downstairs and lock the doors.'

Atin came back presently and said: 'It's all right. I've taken out the electric bulbs from the lamp sockets below. Now let's go up to the terrace.'

They went up the winding stairs together to the roof terrace. Closing the door after him,

Atin sat on the floor with his back against it. Ela sat beside him.

'Try to feel natural, Elie,' said Atin, 'as if nothing has happened, as if we're still in the chapter before the great war begins. Why, your hands are ice-cold, they're actually trembling! Let me warm them.' He took her hands in his own and pressed them to his heart. The faint sound of wedding music came to them from some distant house.

'Are you still afraid, Elie?'

'Afraid of what?'

'Oh, of everything, of every moment.'

'I'm afraid for you, Ontu—of nothing else.'

'Try to think, Elie,' he went on, keeping her hands in his, 'that we're here on such a night as this, fifty or a hundred years hence. The present rings us round too narrowly. What we desire so passionately is ticketed with a high price by the tricky pen of the present. What we mourn so inconsolably is labelled "Eternal Sorrow" with vanishing ink. All lies! Life, the forger, imitates the writing of eternity; death comes and makes away with the false document, smiling—not a cruel nor a mocking smile, but a smile benign as Shiva's with all the beauty of the great peace of dawn after a nightmare of

illusion. Have you, Elie, in the stillness of the night ever felt the freedom of the depths that is given by death, with its eternal forgiveness?'

'I haven't the power, like you, of seeing things in their bigness. And yet, when my heart is tortured with anxiety for all of you, I try to feel, with conviction, that death is easy.'

'It is cowardly to look on death as a means of escape. It's the only certainty, the sea into which flow all the courses of life, in which the opposites of truth and falsity, good and bad, find their final solution. This very night, this very moment, we two are in the embrace of its immensity. You remember those four little lines of Ibsen?

'Upwards
Towards the peaks,
Towards the stars,
Towards the vast silence.'

Ela with her hands pressed in Atin's sat still in silent thought.

Atin suddenly laughed out, saying: 'There, behind us, hangs motionless the black pall of death stretching back to the infinite. In front of it the play of our life dances along to its last act. Let me bring before you one of its earlier scenes.

Three years ago you celebrated my birthday on this very terrace—you remember?'

'Very well, indeed!'

'Your devoted "boys" were all there. The feast was simple enough. Parched rice fried, boiled green peas peppered and salted, also fritters if I remember right. The boys scrambled for these dainties and finished them to the last pea. Then of a sudden Matilal, with a flourish of his arms, started to declaim: "On this day of brother Atin's new birth into the new age—." I jumped up and clapped my hand over his mouth. "If you persist in making this speech," said I, "the days of your old birth will end here." The new birth, the new age, the gate of death—all these tags sicken me so! The members of the band have tried their best to paint me with their brush, but I've not been able to take their colour.'

'The folly was mine, Ontu. It was I who thought of making you one of us pawns by putting on you the same livery.'

'That's why, I suppose, you vigorously played the loving elder sister. Perhaps you thought a touch of jealousy would help in my reformation. What a delightful trayful you handed out to them—of gushing hospitality, tender inquiry and

needless solicitude. I can still hear your honeyed accents, "Oh, why are you looking so flushed, Nandalal?" And before the poor bashful fellow could stammer out, for truth's sake, that nothing was the matter with him, you bustled about to minister to his imaginary headache with a wet compress. I had my own illusions then, but still I could see that only some immaculate, dream-land ideal of country prompted this display of pure, patriotic sisterliness.'

'Oh, please stop, Ontu, for goodness' sake!'

'You yourself will admit, Elie, that your pose in those days savoured of the ludicrous.'

'I'll admit it, a thousand times. It's you who washed me clean of it. Why then so cruelly remind me of all that to-day?'

'Some heartache impels me, Elie. You asked my forgiveness the other day for drawing me away from my own way of living. But what of my being drawn away from the fullness of life, and yet denied the price I was entitled to? I broke my very nature; but, convention-blinded, you couldn't even break your pledge, devoid of truth as it was—remorse for *this* wouldn't have been so superfluous! I know what stood in your way. You couldn't bring yourself to believe that so much as all this had happened to me.'

'True, Ontu. Even now I can't help wondering how so much power could ever have been mine.'

'How could you know? It's not your own power, but the enchantment of *Maya,* Mother Nature. So magical is the melody of your voice, it flings burning whirls of music through the firmament of my mind. And this hand, these fingers of yours, they have the golden touch, making every trifle, true or false, seem priceless. How tremendous was the attraction which impelled me to accept the insult of my fall from grace, even as I reviled myself at every step. I have read of such a thing happening, but in the pride of my keen intellect I never thought it could happen to me. Now that the time has come to rend the net of illusion, I am telling you the truth so relentlessly.'

'Go on, then, go on with all you have to say. Have no pity on me, who have been so blind, so foolish, so heartless, unable at any time to understand you truly. The incomparable came to me offering itself with outstretched hands; unworthy was I, I could not pay its price. Unimaginable good fortune came to my door, and was turned away, unclaimed, never to return. If yet more punishment be my due, punish me.'

'Let's not talk of punishment. I want to forgive you, with the infinite forgiveness of death itself. That's why I'm here to-day.'

'That's why?'

'Yes, only for that.'

'Wouldn't it have been less cruel not to forgive, rather than step right into this trap of fire, before my very eyes? I know too well you've no desire to live on. If that be so, give me your few remaining days, give me the right to serve you to the end. That's all I beg at your feet.'

'What good will your service do me? You would pour nectar into the broken pitcher of my life! You can't even realize the intolerable gnawing at my heart of the might-have-been. What can your service do for that? What can it avail one who has lost his truth?'

'You haven't lost your truth, Ontu. Every bit of it is there, within you, still.'

'I have lost it. Oh, I've hopelessly lost it!'

'Don't say that!'

'Did you but know what I now am, you'd shiver from head to foot.'

'Look here, Ontu, you're imagining all kinds of horrid things about yourself. What you've

done without any thought of self, however wrong, it can't stain your soul.'

'I've slain my soul, the biggest sin of all. Not a single evil have I been able to uproot from our country—I've only uprooted myself. For that sin I'm condemned not to take you even when you're giving yourself. Accept your hand? With this hand! But why all this? All stains will be washed away by the waters of Lethe, on whose brink we now stand. At such a time let us talk of light things, laughingly. Let me finish the story of my birthday party. Shall I?'

'I'm afraid I can't put my mind on all that, Ontu.'

'The only things in our life worth calling to mind are just such trivialities scattered over a few lightsome days. The ponderous days deserving of oblivion are only too many. My birthday feast being over, Nirod took it into his head to recite Nabin Sen's epic. In the style favoured by the favourite actor of those days he ranted: "Why dost depart, O lord of a thousand rays! look back but once, thou ornament of day—." Good fellow that, Nirod, simple and straight, but with a merciless memory! While I was pining and fretting for the party to come to an end, they needs must ask Bhabesh for a

song. He fortunately protested he couldn't even open his mouth without a harmonium to accompany him—an instrument of torture you didn't happen to possess. So the crisis passed. At last the end, thought I—but no! Apropos of nothing, Satu started an argument whether the anniversary of one's birth properly fell on the same date of the month, or the same day of the moon. I tried to stop it, but signally failed. Pungent patriotism invaded the discussion; voices were raised, friendships were threatened. I felt furious with you. My birthday was but an excuse, I felt sure, for a patriotic orgy.'

'Don't try to judge from the outside, Ontu, which was the excuse and which the real object. I may deserve punishment, but not unjust punishment. Don't you remember, that was the day Mr. Atindra became Ontu for me? Was that such a small thing? Now go on with the story of your pet-name-giving.'

'Then listen, my friend. When I was four or five years old, I was short in stature, of few words, with a stupid look, I'm told, in my eyes. My father's elder brother, on coming home from the upper provinces, saw me for the first time. Taking me on his knee, he facetiously remarked: "Who's responsible for giving this little pigmy the name

of Atindra, Great Indra? Call him rather the opposite, Anatindra. In rhetoric, exaggeration often has the reverse effect"—your pet name of Ontu was really short and affectionate for Anatin. I came to you great. For your sake I cut myself down small—'

Atin stopped short with a start. 'Is that the sound of footsteps?' he muttered as he rose.

'It's only Akhil,' said Ela.

'Sister dear!' came his voice.

'What is it?' asked Ela as she opened the door.

'Your dinner,' announced Akhil.

Ela did no cooking in the house. Her meals came from a restaurant nearby. 'Come along, Ontu, have some food,' she said.

'Don't talk of food now. It takes man quite a long time to die for lack of it, otherwise India wouldn't now have been a land of the living. Akhil, old chap, don't be annoyed with me. Go straight down and begin by eating my share of the dinner; then finish with a run—run right away.'

Akhil ruefully departed.

The two of them sat down as before. Atin began again: 'To go back to that celebration. It seemed it would go on for ever. Not one of them would budge. I kept looking at my watch,

hoping in vain that it might prove a hint to those time-blind youths. At last I had to say to you: "Hadn't you better go off to bed? You're only just up from your influenza." "What's the time?" then arose the question from all sides. It was half-past ten. Yawns here and there indicated the approaching dispersal. "Aren't you coming?" Batu pointedly asked me. "Let's go together." "Where to?" It appeared that he wanted us to pay a surprise visit to the sweepers' quarters, catch them at their drinking, and stop it. I felt angry all over. "What if you stop their drink?" I said roughly. "Have you anything to give them instead?" As the only result of my meaningless excitement, those who were on the point of going, stopped to join in. "Do you then mean to say—" some one began. "I don't mean anything at all!" I shouted back. Then realizing that my outburst was quite uncalled for, I dropped my voice and with a meaning look toward you out of the corner of my eyes, I begged your leave to depart. By the time we had reached the door of your room below, my legs refused to carry me farther. A device occured to me. I slapped by breast pocket saying, "I must have dropped my fountain pen on the terrace." "Let me fetch it for you," offered the irrepressible

Batu, and he immediately ran up the stairs. After him I had to go, to find him making a great show of a search. On seeing me he said with a smile: "Will you go through all your pockets, brother Atin? It may be in one of them." I knew well enough that, to find my pen, nothing short of a voyage of discovery into my rooms would serve. So I had to come forth with, "I want a word with sister Ela." "Very well," he rejoined, nothing daunted, "I'll wait for you." "Oh, get along with you," I blurted out, having come to the end of my patience. "Don't be hanging about me like this!" "I'm going. But what means this loss of temper?" was his parting shot.'

Once more Atin stopped to listen, as some one was heard coming up. It was again Akhil, who came out onto the terrace with a slip of paper. 'Here's a message for brother Atin,' he said; 'I've kept the man waiting in the street.'

'Ela's heart sank within her. 'Who is it?' she whispered.

'Show him into the sitting-room,' Atin told him.

As Akhil doggedly went off, Ela asked, 'Is it Batu?'

'No, it's not.'

'Why don't you tell me who it is? I'm not feeling at all easy.'

'It doesn't matter. I want to finish what I was telling you.'

'It's quite impossible for me to attend to all that now, Ontu.'

'Elie, you really must allow me to come to the end of my story. There's not much left. You came up to the terrace, after Batu had left, bringing with you a faint perfume. You had kept by a special bouquet of tuberoses, till the party was over, for you wanted to put them into my hands when we should be alone. That was the moment of Ontu's new birth, ushered in by these shy flowers. And little by little all Mr. Atindra's gravity, learning and logic were drowned in profound self-forgetfulness. For the first time, that day, you put your arms round my neck, saying, "Here's your birthday present." That was our first kiss. The last kiss is what I've now come to claim.'

Akhil came up once more and reported: 'I locked him in the sitting room. He's now started thumping on the door. He says it's very important. He'll be breaking the door at this rate.'

'It's all right, Akhil,' said Atin. 'I'll see that he's calmed down before the door gives way.

You needn't mount guard over him. Leave him alone and clear out. I'll look after your sister Ela.'

Ela drew Akhil to herself and, kissing him on the forehead, entreated him: 'Akhil dear, my own little brother, you really must go away from here. Take this money. I've been keeping it tied up in a corner of my *sari* for your birthday. Now touch my feet and promise me you'll leave at once.'

'Look here, Akhil,' said Atin. 'You'll have to follow the advice I'm giving you. If anybody asks you, tell him exactly what happened. Say that at eleven o'clock tonight it was I who turned you out of this house. Now come along with me, let's make these words true.'

Ela once more drew Akhil near and said: 'Don't worry about me, Akhil darling. Your brother, Atin, is with me, there's no fear.'

When Atin, tucking Akhil's arm under his own, was marching him off, Ela, unable to contain herself, cried, 'Let me come down with you, too!'

'You can't do that!' commanded Atin.

Ela remained leaning over the low parapet of the terrace, trying hard to suppress the sobs

rising in her breast. She somehow felt that this was her last parting with Akhil.

Atin came back. 'Akhil's gone,' he said. 'I've bolted the front and back doors.'

'And the man in the sitting-room?'

'I've let him out, too. He thought that, engrossed in our talk, I'd forgotten all about his message. He was beginning to get afraid that another *Arabian Nights* story had been started. Arabian Nights is the word! It's all been a story, an absurd marvel of a story. Are you feeling afraid, Elie—aren't you afraid of me?'

'Afraid of you, Ontu? What an idea!'

'Is there anything I'm incapable of doing? I've come down to the last rung of my degradation. The other day our band robbed a helpless old widow of all she had. Our Manmatha belonged to the same village and was on friendly terms with her. It was he who told of her hoard and showed the way. She made him out through his mask, and tried to plead with him. "Manu, my son, how could you have the heart—?" They didn't let her live to say any more. For the purposes of what we call the country's need—the need for murdering our own souls!—that widow's money passed through my hands to headquarters. Part of that money helped to break my recent fast.

I end my career branded as a thief—receiver and user of stolen property. Batu has got the charge laid against robber Atindra. He has made it practically certain that I'll be arrested tomorrow. Meanwhile, fear me, for I myself fear that tainted ghost of my dead self. There's no one with you to-day.'

'But you're here yourself!'

'Who'll save you from me?'

'I don't care if I'm not saved from you!'

'The word has gone forth from your own band—your beloved, patriotic brothers, whom you've anointed with sandal-paste on each Brothers' Day—that you're not fit to live any longer.'

'How am I more unworthy than they?'

'You're supposed to know too much, and liable to give out what you know under torture.'

'Never.'

'What if the man who came just now brought this order? You know what an order means with us!'

Ela started up. 'Is this true, Ontu, is it really true?'

'We've got a piece of news.'

'What's that?'

'At the end of this very night, at dawn, the police will come for you.'

'I was certain they'd do so one of these days.'

'What made you think so?'

'I had a letter from Batu yesterday, telling me, and offering to save me.'

'How?'

'He says if I marry him, he'll stand surety for me and get me off.'

Atin's face darkened. 'And what was your reply?' he asked.

'I simply wrote the word "Monster" on it, and returned the letter.'

'Well, our information is that Batu himself will lead the police here. If he can get your consent, he'll come to terms with the tiger and benevolently offer you refuge in the crocodile's hole. After all, he has a soft heart!'

Ela seized Atin's feet, begging him: 'Kill me, Ontu, kill me with your own hands. I couldn't wish for a happier end.' She got up from the floor and, throwing her arms round him, kissed him again and again as she repeated, 'Kill me, Atin, kill me now!' She tore open the front of her blouse.

Atin stood rigid as a statue.

'Don't have any qualms,' Ela continued. 'Am I not yours, wholly yours, even in death? Take me. Don't let their unclean hands touch my body, for this body belongs to you.'

'Go to bed,' commanded Atin in a hard voice. 'I order you, go at once.'

But, clasping Atin to her, Ela went on: 'Ontu, my Ontu, my king, my god! I've not to this day been able to show you how much I love you. By this love I charge you—kill me, kill me!'

Atin took hold of her arm and drew her down with him to her bedroom. 'Get into bed at once,' he repeated, 'and go off to sleep.'

'I can't, sleep won't come.'

'I've brought medicine that'll put you to sleep.'

'What's the use of that, Ontu? Let the last bit of my conciousness be for you. Is it chloroform that you have? Throw it away. I'm not a coward. Let me die awake, in your arms. Let our last kiss be eternal, Ontu, my Ontu.'

From afar came the thin sound of a whistle.

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